

(Dhātu) Pubbe Sambodha Sutta The Discourse on “Before the Self-awakening” (on the Elements)

[The Buddha’s reflection on the elements]
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 14.31/2:170 f)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2009

1 Introduction

There are a number of discourses entitled Pubbe Sambodha Sutta; they are here listed along with closely related discourses applying the “gratification” (*assāda*) formula, thus:¹

(1) (Dhātu) Pubbe Sambodha S	(S 14.31/2:170 f)	SD 29.17	the four elements,
(2) Acariṃ Sutta	(S 14.32/2:171 f)	SD 29.18	the four elements,
(3) Assāda Sutta 1	(S 22.26/3:27 f)		the 5 aggregates (definitions),
(4) Assāda Sutta 2	(S 22.27/3:29)		the 5 aggregates (quest),
(5) Assāda Sutta 3	(S 22.28/3:30 f)		the 5 aggregates (release),
(6) Pubbe Sambodha S 1 (Ajjhatta)	(S 35.13/4:6-8)	SD 14.9	the 6 sense-bases
(7) Pubbe Sambodha S 2 (Bahiddhā)	(S 35.14/4:8)	SD 14.10	the 6 sense-objects
(8) (Assāda) Pubbe Sambodha S	(A 3.101/1:258 f)	SD 14.6	the world (definitions),
(9) (Loka) Assāda Sutta	(A 3.102/1:260)	SD 14.7	the escape from the world,

All these discourses examine the various doctrinal models—the four elements, the 5 aggregates, the 6 senses, the 6 sense-objects, and the world—in terms of their gratification (*assāda*), their danger (*ādīnava*) and the escape (*nissarāṇa*) from them.

Another interesting point is that they are mostly in *in pairs*. Both suttas (1) and (2) deal with the four elements following the gratification formula; but while (1) defines “gratification,” “danger” and “escape,” (2) only gives a summary reflection.

Suttas (3), (4) and (5) deal with the five aggregates: (3) defines gratification-danger-escape; (4) is a summary reflection on the Buddha’s quest; and (5) shows how beings are liberated.

Both sutta (6) and (7) deal with the sense; while (6) deals with the internal senses (ie the sense-faculties), (7) deals with the external senses (ie sense-objects). Both suttas reflect on the gratification formula.

While sutta (8) opens with questions, sutta (9) opens with the assurance of an escape (that is, liberation) from the world. As in the (3)-(5) triad, here (8) defines gratification-danger-escape, and (9)—like (4) and (5)—makes a summary reflections.

One surmise we can make is that the Aṅguttara discourses on the gratification formula seem to echo those of the Saṃyutta in style, but deal with a very simple subject, “the world.” Understandably, most+ of such gratification-formula discourses are in the Saṃyutta, which is more focussed on meditation, while the Aṅguttara is more directed to the lay training.

2 Assāda, ādīnava, nissarāṇa

The three terms—*assāda*, *ādīnava* and *nissarāṇa*—often appear as a set in the texts. The Commentaries relate them to the four noble truths thus:

danger (*ādīnava*) refers to the truth of suffering (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, change);
gratification (*assāda*) refers to the truth of the arising of suffering, that is, craving (pleasure and joy); and

¹ For a fuller list, see (Assāda) Pubbe Sambodha S (A 3.101) = SD 14.6 Intro (2).

escape (*nissaraṇa*) refers to the ending of suffering, nirvana (the uprooting of desire).
(DA 2:512; MA 2:11)

It is interesting to see that the sequences are reversed here. In fact, understandably, the *assāda* model is an experiential one, used to show suffering as *cause* first: one seeks various forms of gratification, and this leads to suffering. Whereas the *sacca* model is a sort of therapeutic list: the ailment, the cause, the cure, and the prescription. Although the fourth truth, that of the path, is not directly mentioned here, it is implied as the means of escape.

— — —

The Discourse on “Before the Self-awakening” (on the Elements) (S 14.31/2:170 f)

1 [The Blessed One was] staying at Sāvattḥī.

The questions

- 2 “Bhikshus, before my self-awakening, when I was still a bodhisattva, it occurred to me:
3 ‘Now what is the gratification regarding *the earth element*, what is its danger, what is the escape?
What is the gratification regarding *the water element*, what is its danger, what is the escape?
What is the gratification regarding *the fire element*, what is its danger, what is the escape?
What is the gratification regarding *the wind element*, what is its danger, what is the escape?’

The knowing

4 Then, bhikshus, this occurred to me:

5 (1) THE EARTH ELEMENT. ‘The pleasure and joy² that depending on the earth element—this is *the gratification* in the earth element.

That the earth element is impermanent, unsatisfactory, subject to change—this is *the danger* in the earth element.

The removal of desire and lust, the abandoning of desire and lust, for the earth element—that is *the escape* from the earth elements.³

6 (2) THE WATER ELEMENT. ‘The pleasure and joy that depending on the water element—this is *the gratification* in the earth element.

That the water element is impermanent, unsatisfactory, subject to change—this is *the danger* in the water element.

The removal of desire and lust, the abandoning of desire and lust, for the water element—that is *the escape* from the water elements.

7 (3) THE FIRE ELEMENT. ‘The pleasure and joy that depending on the fire element—this is *the gratification* in the fire element.

That the fire element is impermanent, unsatisfactory, subject to change—this is *the danger* in the fire element.

² That is, bodily pleasure and mental joy.

³ Comy: Since nirvana entails (*nibbānam āgamma*) that desire and lust are removed and abandoned, nirvana is the escape from it. (SA 2:152)

Living Word of the Buddha SD 29.17 S 14.31 On “Before the Self-awakening” (Elements)

The removal of desire and lust, the abandoning of desire and lust, for the fire element—that is *the escape* from the fire elements.

8 (4) THE WIND ELEMENT. ‘The pleasure and joy that depending on the wind element—this is *the gratification* in the wind element.

That the wind element is impermanent, unsatisfactory, subject to change—this is *the danger* in the wind element.

The removal of desire and lust, the abandoning of desire and lust, for the wind element—that is *the escape* from the wind elements.⁴

The awakening

9 Bhikshus, so long as I did not directly know these four elements as they really are, regarding the gratification as gratification, and the danger as danger, and the escape as escape,

for that long I did not claim that I had awakened to the supreme full self-awakening in this world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans.

10 But, bhikshus, when I directly knew, as they really are, thus—the world’s gratification as gratification, and the danger as danger, and the escape as escape—

then I claimed that I had awakened to the supreme full self-awakening in this world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans. [171]

11 The knowledge and vision arose in me:

‘Unshakable is my liberation⁵—this is my last birth. There is now no more rebirth!’”

— evaṃ —

090804; 090805

⁴ Comy: This discourse discusses the four noble truths. *The gratification (assāda)* is the noble truth that is the arising of suffering. *The danger (ādīnava)* is the noble truth that is suffering;. *The escape (nissaraṇa)* is the noble truth that is the ending of suffering. *The path that understands the ending (nirodha-p.pajānāno maggo)* is the noble truth that is the path. (SA 2:154)

⁵ Ee *ceto, vimutti*, which is clearly a wr. Following WT and all other texts (see Intro 1). Comy: The knowledge arose, “This liberation of mine by the fruit of arhathood is unshakable.” Its unshakability can be understood through cause and through object. It is unshakable “through cause” (*karaṇato*) because there the defilements eradicated by the four paths cannot return. It is unshakable “through object” (*ārammaṇato*) because it occurs with nirvana, the unshakable state, as object. (SA 2:154)